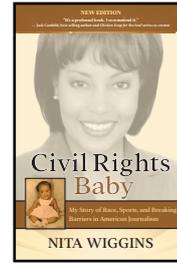


Muhammad Ali appears in four chapters of *Civil Rights Baby: My Story of Race, Sports, and Breaking Barriers in American Journalism* by Nita Wiggins.

Exclusive content

Access the Index of *Civil Rights Baby*, online only, using [this Index link](#).



CHAPTER 13

Destiny's Child and Emotional Rescue

A Heavyweight Champ on Each Arm

Back home by eight a.m., I hurriedly prepared an outfit to wear for Saturday events with Muhammad Ali. I would have to leave home around ten a.m. to meet up with the entourage.

At some point during the day, while I was with the entourage of the former heavyweight boxing champion, the reigning heavyweight boxing champion called



Former boxing coach and judge, Nita Wiggins, with Muhammad Ali and WSAZ TV colleague Jim Backus, 1990, Huntington, West Virginia

and left a message on my recorder. The message began simply enough. “This is James,” he said, as if the sound of his voice alone weren’t enough for me to identify him. [James “Buster” Douglas]

He asked to see me again.

Unfortunately, I would not know this until after midnight, for my fun and satisfying day with Ali stretched longer than I had anticipated. Ali’s road manager, eager to get a break from the routine of eating restaurant meals, had gladly accepted an invitation to attend a dinner at a private home. “Anywhere that Ali and I can get a home-cooked meal, we’ll accept,” Mahdi said.

Would I go as Ali’s dinner date, Mahdi wanted to know.

Why, *sure!*

I asked Mahdi to make a detour on the way to dinner. Let’s go to the television station with Ali, I told him.

CHAPTER 14

“My Wife is Married,” Muhammad Ali Told Me

By the end of Saturday night’s Golden Gloves matches in March 1990, I had figured out how to move within Muhammad Ali’s inner circle—how to maneuver within an entourage as television crews and people from the public try to get up close to the champ. Ali and I had met two days earlier. His road manager was right. I was getting a kick out of seeing the life of Ali from an insider’s vantage point.

As a television journalist, I knew how to flash a smile on cue for photos with the fans and how to chat comfortably with people who were waiting to take pictures with the champ. All the better for the followers to pass the time in line more enjoyably. I picked up this series of tasks without anyone’s asking.

I witnessed Ali, champ-like and tireless, shaking hands and posing for pictures. He seriously approached his statesman and sportsman duties, making children smile, women giggle, and sponsors feel on top of the world.

When Ali did talk, it was sparingly, but in the sparseness of words, he managed more than once to call me pretty.

As Saturday evening wound down, I finally asked the question that had been on my mind from the day we met.

“Are you married?”

“My wife is married,” he wittily replied.

Yolanda Williams and Ali had married nearly four years before his visit to Huntington. He conducted himself as a married man around me. A *flirty* married man, yes, but he never crossed the line with me, nor with anyone else that I observed. I saw only the behavior of an upstanding forty-eight-year-old gentleman.

At age twenty-two, Ali joined the Nation of Islam, drawing derision from some people. He evolved into the role of social leader for millions of others. During the conflicted years in the 1960s and 1970s, America's civil-disobedience soldiers applauded Ali for his staunch disapproval of the gap in the quality of life between black and white families. Peace advocates embraced him as the ultimate celebrity



Ali, Wiggins, and unidentified Golden Gloves boxer. Wiggins spent 4 days in the professional entourage of the People's Champ, 1990, Huntington, West Virginia

spokesman against the Viet Nam war. Thus, Ali established himself as an agitator and one who creates opportunities for the black race.

By the time I met Ali, he had long held enough leverage to open doors for blacks. By agreeing to visit my place of work, he was about to become a champion for my personal cause. He may not have been aware of what he was to do, but Mahdi knew that when the People's Champ escorted me to my workplace, his presence alone would become a figurative battering ram against the obstacles in my way.

Ali and Mahdi and I settled comfortably into the limousine after watching that night's amateur bouts at the civic center. In a few short blocks, we arrived at the side-door entrance of WSAZ. The weekend writers, producers, and technicians were working as usual. The security guard, a slightly-built, eagle-eyed man named Manny, spotted the stretch limo as it slowed and stopped at the curb.

I exited the limo first, signaling to the observant watchman that we needed neither further investigation nor police backup. Mahdi followed me out of the limo. As limousine protocol seemed to dictate, the star attraction let the drama outside build up before he presented himself to onlookers.

When the limo first arrived, the faces of my newsroom colleagues began appearing in the row of windows of the station's building. Tina, one of the production crew members, told me later that someone said, "It's a limo. We know Nita's in there." Not one of them dreamed, however, that on my Saturday night off, I would bring Ali to the station to meet them.

Security guard Manny opened the employee door. The champ shook the hands of overwhelmed employees. Manager Mahdi drank in the appreciation that blanketed his client. He also liked hearing my colleagues thank me for the treasured moment.

I took Ali inside the studio control room to ensure that the hard-working technical people got the chance to greet the champ. After we left the techs, I asked Ali if he wanted to see my desk. In the newsroom, I offered Ali my chair. He sat.



Uncontested: Muhammad Ali claims my chair in the WSAZ TV newsroom, 1990, Huntington, West Virginia

Word of Ali's presence had spread throughout the two floors of the building, so people flooded the newsroom. Mahdi talked with a few of them while Ali busied himself with something interesting on my desk: shortbread Girl Scout cookies. With half of the canister remaining, the legendary Ali finished off the cookies.

My champ and his manager wrapped up the visit after we felt that everyone had spoken to Ali or had taken pictures with him.

And, an important question rocketed into my brain and momentarily distracted me in a good way: What would be the impact on Monday morning when the news director heard of my personal connections with the sports world's greatest living legend?

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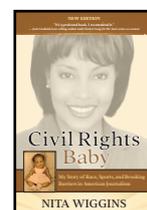
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Muhammad Ali appears in chapters 12, 13, 14, and 15 of Wiggins' Civil Rights Baby. More at www.NitaWiggins.com. View also the online Index of Civil Rights Baby to discover Wiggins' encounters with others who fortified and encouraged her, including Rosa Parks, Jackie Joyner-Kersey, and Oprah Winfrey.

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